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Mahatma Gandhi and Bhagat Singh: Perceptions of Freedom

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Abstract:
Mahatma Gandhi and Bhagat Singh are regarded as the legendary leaders committed towards Indian freedom movement. However, their means were different. Mahatma Gandhi spearheaded a civil disobedience movement founded on the principles of non-violence and Satyagraha. While Bhagat Singh waged a revolutionary armed struggle based upon violence, who inspired youth to participate in this freedom movement. Bhagat Singh was executed while he was only 24 years old. In contrast, Gandhi lived a long life and India succeeded in gaining freedom under his leadership. Both hailed as national heroes yet history has witnessed the prominence of Mahatma Gandhi in Indian freedom. Furthermore, it is evident that as a young lad, Bhagat Singh's inspiration was Mahatma Gandhi who actively took part in the non-cooperation movement and was a believer to get freedom under Gandhi's leadership. But when Gandhi called off the movement following the Chauri Chaura riot in 1922, Bhagat Singh became disenchanted with Gandhism and gradually veered towards the tenets of armed revolutionary struggle. So, the present study will try to highlight whether it is actually correct to say that Bhagat Singh was a total contrast to Mahatma Gandhi? Their distinctly different approaches have spawned many controversies and even conspiracy theories. But Gandhi was admirer of Bhagat Singh and publicly acknowledged his patriotism on many occasions. There are some questions like: What were the reasons behind Mahatma Gandhi's success in achieving self rule in India? What were the major causes behind conversion and diversion between Mahatma Gandhi and Bhagat Singh? What are the Revolutionary movements, rules and methods of both to achieve freedom and in what respects they were different? For the present study, the researcher will use the primary as well as secondary sources available on the present research work. Further, the researcher will try to visit living places of both personalities to collect further required information to analyse the conclusion with deeper study of the proposed topic. The present study will also explore the perceptions of both leaders regarding each other and Gandhi's role in Bhagat Singh's defence?

Keywords:
prominence: holding higher value than others executed: perform disenchanted: disappointed by someone or something previously respected or admired veered: swing-spawned:released

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Introduction:

India achieved complete emancipation from British rule after lot of hassle. This struggle of independence was flagged by numerous freedom fighters who not only sacrificed their personal life but their precious lives too. They dedicated themselves without even giving a single thought to their personal lives. Such great leaders not only provided freedom but also inspired youth of present time. The names of some of the famous leaders are Subhas Chandra Bose, Bipin Chandra Pal, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Ram Prasad Bismil, Jayaprakash Narayan, Chandrasekhar Azad, Baba Gurdit Singh, Sukhdev, Lala LajpatRai, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Jawaharlal Nehru. The list does not ends here and all of them being recognised as brave soldiers of India. Task of all leaders is worth saluting and mentioning ,but two iconic leaders whose legacy as legendary figures still continue and are immensely popular even after their death are: Mahatma Gandhi and Bhagat Singh.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was the pre-eminent leader of Indian freedom movement. He opted non-violent ways of achieving independence as was a believer of truth and ahimsa. He launched many movements such as Civil Disobedience, movement, Quit India Movement, Satyagraha, Swadeshi and many more in a list to explain. All movements had single motive to get freedom. Gandhi presented all his demands in front of British government so as to achieve independence. Not only in India but also abroad he came out to strong force to bring respect and prestige for India and Indians. Apart from this, he educated masses to know their civil rights. Gandhi was 24 when he arrived in South Africa to work as a legal representative for the Muslim Indian Traders based in the city of Pretoria. He first employed non-violent civil disobedience as an expatriate lawyer in South Africa, in the resident Indian community's struggle for civil rights. In South Africa, Gandhi faced the discrimination based on colour. He even was thrown off a train at Pietermaritzburg after refusing to move from the first-class but Gandhi was not a man to lose. With effect of it he protested, complained. Finally he was allowed on first class the next day. Partiality even not ended here and he was beaten by a driver for refusing to move to make room for a European passenger. He suffered other hardships on the journey as well, including being barred from several hotels with a sheer reason of not belonging to white community. In another incident, the magistrate of a Durban court ordered Gandhi to remove his turban, which he strongly disagreed and remained as firm as a mountain. These events were a turning point in Gandhi's life and shaped his social activism and awakened him to social injustice.

After witnessing racism, prejudice and injustice against Indians in South Africa, Gandhi began to question his place in society and his people's standing in the British Empire. He decided to extend his original period of stay in South Africa to assist Indians in opposing a bill to deny them the right to vote. In regard to this bill Gandhi sent out a memorial to Joseph Chamberlain, British Colonial Secretary, asking him to reconsider his position on this bill. Though he proved unable to halt the bill's passage, but his campaign proved out to be a victory in bringing attention to the grievances of

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Indians in South Africa which Indians either ignored or felt helpless. He helped found the Natal Indian Congress in 1894 and through this organisation, he moulded the Indian community of South Africa into a unified political force.

In 1906, the Transvaal government promulgated a new Act compelling registration of the colony's of Indian population. At a mass protest meeting held in Johannesburg on 11th September that year, Gandhi adopted his still evolving methodology of Satyagraha (non-violent protest), for the first time. He urged Indians to defy the new law and to suffer the punishments for doing so. The community find this plan in their favour and totally favoured this plan. In this ensuing seven-year struggle, thousands of Indians were jailed, flogged, or shot for striking, refusing to register, for burning their registration cards or engaging in other forms of non-violent resistance. The government successfully repressed the Indian protesters, but the public outcry over the harsh treatment of peaceful Indian protesters by the South African government forced South African leader Jan Christiaan Smuts, himself a philosopher, to negotiate a compromise with Gandhi. Gandhi's ideas took shape, and the concept of Satyagraha matured during this struggle. He spent 21 years in South Africa, where he developed his political views, ethics and political leadership skills which he later applied in India to attain independence.

After his return to India in 1915, he set about organising peasants, farmers, and urban labourers to protest against excessive land-tax and discrimination. Guha argues that when he returned to India in 1914 he was proficient at public speaking, fund-raising, negotiations, media relations, and self-promotion. In 1915, when Gandhi returned to India permanently ,he brought an international reputation as a leading Indian nationalist, theorist and organiser and later joined the Indian National Congress. Gopal Krishna Gokhale introduced Gandhi to Indian political scenario and asked Gandhi to tour India to know ground realities of India. Gandhi took Gokhale's liberal approach based on British Whiggish traditions and transformed it to make it look wholly Indian. During the latter part of World War I, Gandhi agreed recruit Indians for war. Initially many Indians rejected to join but when Gandhi convinced them they agreed on the same. Perhaps motive was to walk shoulder to shoulder with British government so that government will also understand their rights and demands for achieving independence which he succeeded in. Gandhi's first major achievements came in 1918 when he decided to launch Champaran satyagraha and Kheda satyagraha in Bihar and Gujarat respectively. In Champaran the peasantry was forced to grow Indigo. This system was termed as ‘Tinkathia system’. Unhappy with this, the peasantry appealed to Gandhi at his ashram in Ahmedabad. Pursuing a strategy of non-violent protest, Gandhi took the administration by surprise and won concessions from the authorities.

During the Khilafat movement, he attracted a strong base of Muslim support with local chapters in all Muslim centres in India. Gandhi became India's first national leader with a multicultural base. Along with this, Gandhi facilitated his rise to power

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within Congress, which had previously been unable to reach many Muslims. Gandhi took leadership of Congress in 1920. With Congress now behind him in 1920, Gandhi had the base to employ non-cooperation, non-violence and peaceful resistance as his "weapons" in the struggle against the British Raj. Nationwide campaigns were launched by him for easing poverty which he called stain on fabric of society. Gandhi was against all odds, who also favoured equality and expand women's rights, building religious and ethnic amity, ending untouchability, but above all for achieving Swaraj or self-rule. Gandhi opted swadeshi policy-the boycott of foreign-made goods, especially British goods with a view that India has to be self reliant. Boycott of foreign goods was also a way to show strong non-dependence side of Indians. In addition to boycotting British products, Gandhi urged the people to boycott British educational institutions and law courts, to resign from government employment, and to forsake British titles and honours. All stratas of Indian society supported Gandhi's Non-cooperation Movement and showed greater interest for way of achieving freedom which popularly known as 'Gandhism'. Yet, just as the movement reached its apex, it ended abruptly as a result of a violent clash in the town of Chauri-Chaura.

Gandhi pushed through a resolution at the Calcutta Congress in December 1928 calling on the British government to grant freedom to India to which government did not agree. On 26 January 1930, the Indian National Congress declared the independence of India. The British did not recognise that and more negotiations ensued, with Congress taking a role in provincial government in the late 1930s. Gandhi and Congress withdrew their all sort of assistance to British rule when the Viceroy declared war on Germany in September 1939 without consulting anyone. Tensions escalated until Gandhi demanded immediate independence in 1942. Such declaration made British Government to be on pins and needles, who responded by imprisoning him and tens of thousands of Congress leaders for the duration. Gandhi famously led Indians in challenging the British-imposed salt tax with the 400 km Dandi Salt March in 1930. Where he along with other Indians made salt. Later in 1942 Gandhi launched Quit India Movement so as to live freely. For being so adamant for his demands, he was imprisoned, upon many occasions, in both South Africa and India. Eventually, in August 1947, India got freedom from British rule, but the British Indian Empire was partitioned into two dominions, a Hindu-majority India and Muslim Pakistan. In the months following, he undertook several fasts unto death to promote religious harmony. The last of these, undertaken on 12 January 1948 at age 78, also had the indirect goal of pressuring India to pay out some cash assets owed to Pakistan. Not all people favour a person, similarly some Indians thought Gandhi was too accommodating. Among them was Nathuram Godse, a Hindu nationalist, who assassinated Gandhi on 30 January 1948 by firing three bullets into his chest at point-blank range. Gandhi attempted to practise non-violence and truth in all situations, and preached the same for people. He was a believer of simple living high thinking. He spent his entire life in a self-sufficient residential community and wore the traditional Indian dhoti and shawl,

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woven with yarn hand spun on a charkha. He used to eat simple vegetarian food, and also undertook long fasts as means of both self-purification and social protest.

Bhagat Singh is considered as one of the most influential revolutionaries of the Indian independence movement. He was born into a Sikh family in Panjab which had been active in Indian independence movements against the British Raj. As a teenager Singh studied European revolutionary movements and was attracted to anarchist and Marxist ideologies. He was influenced by a number of incidents during his childhood which instilled in him a deep sense of patriotism to eventually take up the struggle for India's independence. Independence from British rule was such dominating that when he was just a kid, he went with his father to a field where he started digging. When his father asked about the same he replied with a shocking answer that if he will sow bullet, he will be able to reap many bullets as in case of crops through which he can make India freedom. In 1919, at the age of 12, Bhagat Singh visited the site of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, where hundreds of people gathered in peace for a public meeting, were fired upon without warning, with order of general Dyer. As a young lad, Bhagat Singh was under the influence of Mahatma Gandhi and actively took part in the non-cooperation movement. He earnestly believed that India would indeed gain freedom under Gandhi's leadership. But when Gandhi called off the movement following the Chauri Chaura riot in 1922, he became disenchanted with Gandhism and gradually veered towards the tenets of armed revolutionary struggle.

He joined the Young Revolutionary Movement and began to advocate for the violent overthrow of the British in India. He founded the Indian nationalist youth organisation Naujawan Bharat Sabha in March 1926. He also joined the Hindustan Republican Association, which later titled as Hindustan Socialist Republican Association, which had prominent leaders, such as Ram Prasad Bismil, Chandrashekhar Azad and Ashfaqulla Khan. Due to widespread popularity of Singh police became concerned with Singh's influence on youths and decided to trap Singh so as to divert him from his goal. In May 1927 police arrested him on the mere pretext of having been involved in a bombing that had taken place at Lahore in October of the previous year. He was released on a surety of Rs. 60,000 five weeks after his arrest. He wrote for and edited Urdu and Punjabi newspapers, published from Amritsar, as well as briefly for the Veer Arjun newspaper published in Delhi. He also contributed to Kirti, the journal of the Kirti Kisan Party ("Workers and Peasants Party"), and in September 1928, that party organised an all-India meeting of revolutionaries in Delhi with Singh as its secretary. He later rose to become this association's leader.

After Lala Lajpat Rai’s death during a non-violent protest against the Simon Commission’s visit, he was taken back. This incident made him taking a vow to take revenge against British officials. In this vow he was not alone but was joined by other revolutionaries such as Shivaram Rajguru, Sukhdev Thapar and Chandrashekhar Azad, in a plot to kill Scott. These people did not look back and delve themselves so deeper in this movement that they had to face all heinous actions of British govern-

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ment and ultimately sacrificed their life. However, in a case of mistaken identity, Singh received a signal to shoot on the appearance of John P. Saunders, an Assistant Superintendent of Police. He was shot by Rajguru and Singh while leaving the District Police Headquarters in Lahore on 17 December 1928. Although the murder of Saunders was condemned as a retrograde action by Mahatma Gandhi, the Congress leader, others were more understanding of the motivation. Within a few months, he achieved amazing popularity. He eluded efforts by the police to capture him. Together with Batukeshwar Dutt, he undertook a successful effort to throw two bombs and leaflets inside the Central Legislative Assembly while shouting slogans of revolution. Subsequently they volunteered to surrender and be arrested. Singh and Dutt were sentenced to 14 years life imprisonment.

On 15 April 1929, after discovery of Lahore bomb factory police arrested other members of HSRA, out of which seven turned informants. Singh, Rajguru, and Sukhdev were charged with the murder of Saunders. Singh was re-arrested for murdering Saunders and his life sentence in the Assembly Bomb case was deferred till the Saunders' case was decided. He was sent to the Mianwali jail from the Delhi jail, where he witnessed discrimination between European and Indian prisoners. Even in prison he did not keep quiet and vehemently opposed all biasness. He along with other prisoners decided to declare hunger strike to protest this. They demanded equality in standards of food, clothing, toiletries and other hygienic necessities, as well as availability of books and a daily newspaper for the political prisoners. He also demanded that Indian prisoners should not be forced to do manual labour or any undignified work in the jail as it was also a part of colour prejudice symbolising hatred against Indians. Since the activities of the hunger strikers had gained popularity and attention amongst the people nationwide, especially youth ,the government decided to advance the start of the Saunders murder trial, which was henceforth called the Lahore Conspiracy Case. He underwent a 116 day fast in jail and his popularity among common Indians melted all geographical boundaries of Punjab.

During this time, sufficient evidence was brought against him for a conviction in the Saunders case, after trial by a Special Tribunal. Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev were convicted and subsequently capital punishment was announced against them for Lahore conspiracy case on 24 March, 1931. In Punjab, a defence committee drew up a plan to appeal to the Privy Council. Singh initially did not favour it, but later agreed to it in the hope that the appeal would popularise the HSRA in Britain. However the appeal was dismissed. Singh was hanged on 23 March, 1931 at 7:30 pm in Lahore jail with his comrades Rajguru and Sukhdev. His death came out to be an inspiration to thousands of youth, who popularised dream of Singh. After this incident youth not only opposed British government but also pour themselves totally in war of independence. After his hanging, youths in regions around northern India rioted in protest against the British Raj and Gandhi too as youth had an opinion that Singh's hanging could have been canceled if supported by Gandhi.

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In his last letter, Bhagat Singh wrote, “I have been arrested while waging a war. For me there can be no gallows. Put me into the mouth of cannon and blow me off."

Jawaharlal Nehru acknowledged that the popularity of Bhagat Singh was leading to a new national awakening, saying:

> “He was a clean fighter who faced his enemy in the open field ... he was like a spark that became a flame in a short time and spread from one end of the country to the other dispelling the prevailing darkness everywhere.”

Four years after Singh's hanging, the Director of the Intelligence Bureau, Sir Horace Williamson, wrote: His photograph was on sale in every city and township and for a time rivalled in popularity even that of Mr. Gandhi himself.

Singh’s legacy prompted youth in India to begin fighting for Indian independence and to achieve freedom by hook or crook. He started being idealised by thousands of youngsters of the time and in modern India. Both Mahatma Gandhi and Bhagat Singh are two front wheels of Indian freedom movement cart which was even not dreamt to work without them. Both were committed towards achieving goal of India's freedom from British rule. However, the means they adopted were distinctly different. Mahatma Gandhi spearheaded a civil disobedience movement founded on the principles of non-violence and Satyagraha. While Bhagat Singh waged a revolutionary armed struggle laced with violence towards the British regime. Both had their own views and ideologies but the motive was same. Gandhi inspired all people not only in India but all Indians in the world to join hands to fetch Independence from British empire which they deserve but Singh on the other hand created a new way to demand independence. Also Singh turned out to be a great in aspiration of youth revolution to join the freedom movement. Both leaders brought prestige to India in form of freedom. Both contributed immensely towards the Indian freedom. Bhagat Singh was executed while he was only 24 years old. In contrast, Gandhi lived a long life and India succeeded in gaining freedom under his leadership. Gandhi is affectionately known as Bapu while Bhagat Singh is remembered as Shaheed-E-Azam. The youth of India still idealise Singh as a brave hero ,who was voted the "Greatest Indian" in a poll by the Indian magazine India Today in 2008, ahead of Bose and Gandhi. Although Bhagat Singh was quite popular yet history has seen the prominence of Mahatma Gandhi in Indian freedom movement who became popular and famous not only in India but overseas too.

The pre-eminence of Mahatma Gandhi and Bhagat Singh in Indian freedom movement and their distinctly different approaches have spawned many controversies and even conspiracy theories. Most of these stem from Gandhi and the 'Indian National Congress's alleged failure to prevent Bhagat Singh's execution despite enjoying substantial clout with the British government. In fact, in number of recent Bollywood

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movies like 'Shaheed Bhagat Singh' it has been shown that Gandhi indeed could have done more to save Bhagat Singh's life. But Gandhi was admirer of Bhagat Singh and publicly acknowledged his patriotism on many occasions. The Mahatma in fact wrote to the Viceroy pleading with him to commute the death sentence of Singh and his accomplices. Bhagat Singh's 404-page jail diary speaks a lot about his ideas, philosophy and his dreams for the country. There are some questions like: What were the reasons behind Mahatma Gandhi's success in achieving self-rule in India? What were the major causes behind conversion and diversion between Mahatma Gandhi and Bhagat Singh? What are the Revolutionary movements, rules and methods of Gandhi and Bhagat Singh to achieve freedom and in what respects they were different? Was Bhagat Singh a terrorist or not? Was he an atheist or not? So, the present study has tried to address the issues like how Gandhi over shadowed Bhagat Singh and emerged as a strong focus of freedom movement? Was it just the contrasting principles, ideologies and approaches or Gandhi's mass appeal, charisma or political strategy? And whether it is actually correct to say that Bhagat Singh was a total contrast to Mahatma Gandhi? Through the current study, an effort has been made to explore the perceptions of both leaders regarding the freedom, regarding each other and Gandhi's role in Bhagat Singh's defence? For the purpose of the present research work, various primary as well as secondary sources were used.

Materials and Methods:

Used secondary sources or analysis based on primary sources and qualitative methods.

Conclusion:

Both Mahatma Gandhi and Bhagat Singh are two legendary figures of Indian freedom movement. Both preferred different strategies and were equally popular among masses. Among martyrs who willingly treaded the thorny path with courage and faced the gallows with fortitude, the name of Bhagat Singh shines as a star and is reveredly remembered as Shaheed-E-Azam. So, Bhagat Singh has been ranked as a rival of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi considered Satyagraha as a strategic, ethical and pedagogic tool. On the other hand, Bhagat Singh criticized the upliftment of satyagraha from a political strategy to a vague moral appeal. Gandhi was a strict follower of non-violence (ahimsa) while for Bhagat Singh the question of violence or non-violence was merely a question of strategy of the political struggle. Although Bhagat Singh's acts of violence were heroic and truly patriotic yet they yielded not much success because the masses were not ready for violence, and the political leadership also had opted for another strategy. On the other hand, Gandhian non-violence resonated with the Indian masses and offered them a chance to serve the nation. Gandhi's Satyagraha involved mass-participation and became quite popular. Due to this popularity, he is affectionately remembered as Bapu. Gandhi despite his disapproval of Bhagat Singh's action, regarded his sacrifice a patriotic one, and described his death as a great loss to nation. After studying and comparing the perceptions of Mahatma Gandhi and Bhagat Singh, the present study concludes that

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1. One of the prime reason of success of Mahatma Gandhi was the methods deployed by his that is satyagraha and non-violence (harmless methods to present demands)

2. Gandhi had far sighted goals but goals of Bhagat Singh could be termed as short term as latter opted tit for tat theme.

3. The major causes behind conversion and diversion between Mahatma Gandhi and Bhagat Singh were the methods and strategies.

4. Although both aimed to achieve one common goal, yet the methods adopted by them were as different as chalk and cheese.

5. Gandhi believed in the use of non-violent force and was also willing to compromise. Gandhi considered Satyagraha and non-violence as two strategic tools for achieving freedom. For Gandhi satyagraha was a form of ethical-political operation to reinforce rationality in an otherwise irrational and inhuman system of oppression and exploitation that denied humanity of its essential dignity. For Bhagat Singh, such a view was, at best a naivety that failed to gauge the political task at hand. It could be practiced against individuals – even the most hideous ones – but not against a system that was much beyond any individual or group of individuals.

6. Bhagat Singh was not blind adherent of violence. He differentiated between 'violence' and 'force', the former being used by the ruling classes, the oppressors or the state to perpetuate exploitation and their rule, while the latter being the resistance put up by the exploited or oppressed people and insist that what they were resorting to was 'force' and not 'violence'.

7. Singh was not a total contrast to Gandhism as he also adopted various forms of struggle such as hunger strike and satyagraha while in jail. He had also actively participated in the non-cooperation movement.

8. Although Bhagat Singh's acts of violence were heroic and truly patriotic yet they yielded not much success because the masses were not ready for violence, and the political leadership also had opted for another strategy. On the other hand, Gandhian non-violence resonated with the Indian masses and offered them a chance to serve the nation.

9. Gandhi despite his disapproval of Bhagat Singh's action, made desperate efforts to save Bhagat Singh's life till the end and described his death as a great loss to nation.

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